

Bear worship

Bear worship (also known as the **bear cult** or **arctolatry**) is the religious practice of the worshipping of bears found in many North Eurasian ethnic religions such as among the Sami, Nivkh, Ainu,^[1] Basques, Germanic peoples, Slavs and Finns.^[2] There are also a number of deities from Celtic Gaul and Britain associated with the bear, and the Dacians, Thracians, and Getians were noted to worship bears and annually celebrate the bear dance festival. The bear is featured on many totems throughout northern cultures that carve them.^[3]



The Ainu *Iomante* ceremony (bear sending). Japanese scroll painting, circa 1870

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Paleolithic cult

The existence of an ancient bear cult among Neanderthals in Western Eurasia in the Middle Paleolithic has been a subject of conjecture due to contentious archaeological findings.^[3] Evidence suggests that Neanderthals could have worshiped the cave bear (*Ursus spelaeus*) and Bear bones have discovered in several cave sites across Western Eurasia. It was not just the presence of these bones, but their peculiar arrangement that intrigued archaeologists.^[4] During the excavation, on-site archaeologists determined that the bones were arranged in such a way that could only have resulted from hominin intervention rather than

natural deposition processes.^[4] Emil Bächler, a proponent of the bear-cult hypothesis, found bear remains in Switzerland and at Morn Cave (*Mornova zijalka*) in Slovenia. Along with Bächler's discovery, bear skulls were found by André Leroi-Gourhan arranged in a perfect circle in Saône-et-Loire.^[4] The discovery of patterns such as those found by André Leroi-Gourhan suggests that these bear remains were placed in this arrangement intentionally; an act which can only be attributed to Neandertals due to the dating of the site and is interpreted as ritual ^[4]



The bear-goddess feeds a bear
(1918)

While these findings have been taken to indicate an ancient bear-cult, other interpretations of remains have led others to conclude that the bear bones presence in these contexts are a natural phenomenon. Ina Wunn, based on the information archaeologists have about early hominins, contends that if Neandertals did worship bears there would be evidence of it in their settlements and camps.^[5] However, most bear remains have been found in caves.^[5] Many archaeologists now theorise that, since most bear species hibernate in caves during the winter, the presence of bear remains is not unusual in this context ^[6] Bears which lived inside these caves perished from natural causes such as illness or starvation.^[7] Wunn argues that the placement of these remains is due to natural, post-depositataion events such as wind, sediment, or water.^[8] Therefore, the assortment of bear remains in caves did not result from human activities^[9] Certain archaeologists, such as Emil Bächler, continue to use their excavations to support that an ancient bear cult did exist.^[10]

Eastern Slavic culture

Bears were the most worshipped animals of Ancient Slavs. During pagan times, it was associated with the god Volos, the patron of domestic animals. Slavic folklore describes the bear as a totem personifying a male: father, husband, or a fiancé. Legends about turnskin bears appeared, it was believed that humans could be turned into bears for misbehavior.^[11]

Altaic peoples

In 1925-1927 N. P. Dyrenkova made field observations of bear worship among the Altai, Tubalar (Tuba-Kiji), Telengit, and Shortsi of the Kuznetskaja Taiga as well as among the Sagai tribes in the regions of Minussinsk, near the Kuznetskaja Taiga (1927).^[12]

Finns

In Finnish pagan culture, the bear was considered a taboo animal and the word for "bear" (*oksi*) was a taboo word. Euphemisms such as *mesikämmen* "honey-hand" were used instead. The modern Finnish word *karhu* (from *karhea*, rough, referring to its rough fur) is also such a euphemism. Calling a bear by its true name was believed to summon the bear. Bear hunting and killing a bear was followed by a party called peijaiset with ceremony



Volos (also called Veles) in the background of the Millennium of Russia Monument

intended to show that the bear would be a "honored guest" instead of a slaughtered animal, and that its death was "accidental", in order to not to anger the bear's spirit. The skull of the bear was hung into a tree, which was venerated as a totem.

Catalan Countries

There are annual bear festivals that take place in various towns and communes in the Pyrenees region.

In Prats de Molló, the Festa de l'ós ("festival of the bear") (also known as dia dels óssos "day of the bears") held on Candlemas (February 2) is a ritual in which men dressed up as bears brandishing sticks terrorize people in the streets.^[13] Formerly, the festival centered on the "bears" mock-attacking the women and trying to blacken their breasts (with soot), which seemed scandalous to outside first-time observers. But according to the testimony of someone who remembered the olden days before that, the festival that at Prats de Molló involved elaborate staging, much like the version in Arles.^[14]

The Arles version (Festa de l'os d'Arles) involves a female character named Rosetta (Roseta) who gets abducted by the "bear". Rosetta was traditionally played by a man or a boy dressed up as a girl. The "bear" would bring the Rosetta to a hut raised on the center square of town (where the victim would be fed sausages, cake, and white wine). The event finished with the "bear" being shaved and "killed".^{[15][14]}

There is also a symmilar festival in the town of Sant Llorenç de Cerdans: Festa de l'ós de Sant Llorenç de Cerdans [ca]

These three well-known festivals take place in towns located in Vallespir, and are known as «Festes de l'os al Vallespir» or «El dia de l'os/dels ossos».^[14]

Andorra, in an entirely different Pyrenean valley, has some festivals dedicated to the she-bear, known collectively as Festes de l'ossa. These include the Ball de l'ossa ("she-bear's dance") in Encamp, and Última ossa ("the last she-bear") in Ordino.

There is also a bear related festival in the Valencian town of La Mata: Festa de l'Onso de la Mata [ca]

Bears in Korean mythology

According to legend, Ungnyeo (literally "bear woman") was a bear who turned into a woman, and gave birth to Dangun, the founder of the first Korean kingdom, Gojoseon. Bears were revered as motherly figure and a symbol of patience.^[16]

Nivkh people

Nivkh bear festival

The bear festival is a religious festival celebrated by the indigenous Nivkh in Russia's far east. A Nivkh Shaman (ch'am) would preside over the Bear Festival, celebrated in the winter between January and February depending on the clan. Bears were captured and raised in a corral for several years by local women, treating the bear like a child. The bear is considered a sacred earthly manifestation of Nivkh ancestors and the gods in bear form. During the Festival the bear is dressed in a specially made ceremonial costume and offered a banquet to take back to the realm of gods to show benevolence upon the clans.^[17] After the banquet the bear is killed and eaten in an elaborate religious ceremony. The festival was arranged by relatives to honor the death of a kinsman. The bear's spirit returns to the gods of the mountain 'happy'

and rewards the Nivkh with bountiful forests.^[18] Generally, the Bear Festival was an inter-clan ceremony where a clan of wife-takers restored ties with a clan of wife-givers upon the broken link of the kinsman's death.^[19] The Bear Festival was suppressed in the Soviet period; since then the festival has had a modest revival, albeit as a cultural rather than a religious ceremony.^[20]

Ainu bear worship

The Ainu people, who live on select islands in the Japanese archipelago, call the bear “kamuy” in their language, which translates to mean "god". While many other animals are considered to be gods in the Ainu culture, the bear is the head of the gods.^[21] For the Ainu, when the gods visit the world of man, they don fur and claws and take on the physical appearance of an animal. Usually, however, when the term “kamuy” is used, it essentially means a bear.^[21] The Ainu people willingly and thankfully ate the bear as they believed that the disguise (the flesh and fur) of any god was a gift to the home that the god chose to visit.^{[22][23]}



A bear festival by Nivkh around 1903



The Ainu Iomante ceremony around 1930

While on Earth – the world of man – the Ainu believed that the gods appeared in the form of animals. The gods had the capability of taking human form, but they only took this form in their home, the country of the gods, which is outside the world of man.^[21] To return a god back to his country, the people would sacrifice and eat the animal sending the god's spirit away with civility. This ritual is called Omante and usually involves a deer or adult bear.^[22]

Omante occurred when the people sacrificed an adult bear, but when they caught a bear cub they performed a different ritual which is called Iomante, in the Ainu language, or Kumamatsuri in Japanese. Kumamatsuri translates to "bear festival" and Iomante means “sending off”.^[24] The event of Kumamatsuri began with the capture of a young bear cub. As if he was a child given by the gods, the cub was fed human food from a carved wooden platter and was treated better than Ainu children for they thought of him as a god.^[25] If the cub was too young and lacked the teeth to properly chew food, a nursing mother will let him suckle from her own breast.^[25] When the cub reaches 2–3 years of age, the cub is taken to the altar and then sacrificed. Usually, Kumamatsuri occurs in midwinter when the bear meat is the best from the added fat.^[25] The villagers will shoot it with both normal and ceremonial arrows, make offerings, dance, and pour wine on top of the cub corpse.^[25] The words of sending off for the bear god are then recited. This festivity lasts for three days and three nights to properly return the bear god to his home.^[25]

See also

- Animal worship
- Arctic
- Arcturus
- Berserker
- Kumaso
- Kalevala
- Rock carvings at Alta

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External links

- [Arctolatry \(http://www.arctolatry.org\)](http://www.arctolatry.org) - A website outlining historical forms of arctolatry throughout the world with maps and timelines.
- [@arctolatrystudies \(https://www.facebook.com/arctolatrystudies/\)](https://www.facebook.com/arctolatrystudies/) - A Facebook page dedicated to the study of arctolatry.

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